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ABSTRACT

There are three standard complaints given by teachers of freshman composition: (1) college freshman students are inferior to English majors and graduate students, or inferior to freshmen from when the teachers were in college: (2) the subject matter of a writing course is inferior to that of literature courses: and (3) those who teach composition do so because they do not excel in literary research. There has been little evidence, however, to prove that students are writing more poorly than comparable students wrote 20 or 40 years ago. Teachers can hardly assert this decline until the question of a definition of ability to write at the college level is resolved. As to the second complaint, the subject matter of composition is language--students' effective use of language, not grammar or literature. Finally, the rhetorical tradition is 2,500 years old. Works by both historical and contemporary scholars have contributed much understanding of how people learn to write and why they do not. As long as faculty members believe that teaching composition is demeaning, they will continue to lose sight of their objectives and suffer a loss of professional prestige. The respect the profession deserves can be restored by changing these attitudes and by remembering that the use of language is the foundation of all learning. (HTH)

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# FRESHMAN COMPOSITION: AN APOLOGY FOR SERVICE COURSES

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Freshman Composition: An Apology for Service Courses

Here's a conversation you'll never hear in the halls of an English Department:

> I can't stand teaching that bunch of dim-witted students in my sophmore survey course. They just don't know the basics. They can't scan poetry; they've never heard of Holman's Handbook; they don't know the difference between a fabliau and a good lai. We shouldn't be teaching literature in college anyway; they should have gotten all that stuff in high school. But if we're going to offer these service courses, everybody ought to teach a section. I'd much rather teach freshman comp.

An apologist for literature courses no doubt would have as much difficulty responding to this imaginary conversation as we do when we encounter similar illogic in discussions of freshman composition courses. Although we attempt to defend them by reasonable suasion and emotional appeals, neither strategy is effective. The phrase "service courses" still carries negative connotations: We'll keep peace with colleagues in other departments, but we don't have to like the work, and we certainly can't regard it legitimate or intellectually rigorous.

Because this is the Freshman English Section, I will assume that you don't share this view. Perhaps you yourself have argued on many occasions that teaching freshmen to write well matters--to them, to you, and you hope, to your colleagues. I don't intend then to reassert this morning the importance of teaching freshman composition; rather, I want to discuss why some of our colleagues resent the course, a resentment they express in illogical, emotional, and sometimes downright nasty ways. Understanding the reasons for their hostility may make us better apologists for the course and its important function in the curriculum.

The complaints I have heard against service courses are three. Some of our colleagues believe that freshman are inferior to other groups of students, English majors and graduate students, for example, or the students

who attended college "when I went to school." Others hold that the subject matter of a writing course, however defined, is inferior to literature, however considered, as the study of genres, historical periods, or cultures. Still others cite arguments from tradition, a view that gives the profession, the institution, and the English department a role in perpetuating misunderstandings about both the students and the subject matter of composition courses. Taken together, these three fallacious arguments define a prejudice against freshman English and those who teach it, a bias summed up by the word "service."

Collegues who find first-semester freshmen inferior to English majors or graduate students have based their prejudice on the astonishing perception that apples are neither pineapples nor oranges. Older students, those who have declared an interest in English and American literature, may make teaching more satisfying for some faculty, but those students are not necessarily superior to freshmen. But teaching freshmen is also unattractive to those who believe that students of 20, 30, or 40 years ago were much better prepared for college than today's eighteen-year-olds. The argument goes something like this: They should have learned to write in high school, but since they didn't, the composition program, especially remedial writing, represents pre-college work. At best, a colleague of mine claims, we are engaged in "reconstructive education," making up for twelve years of inadequate teaching, preserving literacy as best we can. This complaint occurs so frequently in the history of American higher education that we ought ot suspect it.

As early as 1898, C.C. Thatch, in and address to the National Education Association, criticized student writing in words which might as well have appeared in recent issues of Newsweek, Time, or the Chronicle of Higher Education:

> It is difficult to believe, at times, that many of the writers of college-entrance papers are English-speaking boys....They have no vocabulary, words do not appeal to them....Unity or coherence of thought is seldom exhibited. Long chains of unrelated ideas are tacked together in slack-rope sentences, pages long, with a lot of "ands," when a lot of "buts" would be equally exact.... And, worst of all, there is rarely to be found evidence of power of thought or range of reading....[1]

In 1958, when representatives of the American Studies Association, CEA, MLA, and NCTE investigated similar criticisms, they concluded: "We have seen no reliable evidence that students are writing less well than comparable students wrote twenty, forty, or a hundred years ago. Nevertheless, few are satisfied with the present quality of student writing, and there is little agreement on how to attack this problem."[2]

To some extent, every generation laments the decline of literacy among students, but what proof have we of the charge? Those who cite declining SAT scores seem unaware that the test requires no writing. Furthermore, when they claim that the decline results from poor teaching in high school, they betray ignorance of the Wirtz Committee's report, which attributes the decline to changes in the population tested and six additional sets of factors, most of them out of a teacher's control.[3] We cannot assert that freshmen are poorer writers now than before until we answer the question Robert Pooley posed in 1944: "Can we as college teachers set up a clear definition of what we mean by ability to write English on the college level?"[4] Developing such a definition, Pooley argues,

> ...rests upon the accomplishment of three goals. These are, first, to break down barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding between high school and college teachers and to create in both groups a sympathetic understanding of the other's purposes and problems; second, to arrive at common agreements as to the aims and standards of English instruction and to determine the responsibility of the high school and of the college, respectively, in their attainment; and finally, to develop within the colleges...programs of disinterested service to high-school teachers who are preparing pupils for entrance to college English.[5]

Because we have not energetically pursued Pooley's suggestions for decreasing

the diversity of preparation high school graduates bring to freshman composition classes, we have no clear definition of what we mean by the ability to write at the college level and consequently no reliable means of determining whether or not today's freshmen write better or worse than they did a generation ago.

But even if we could prove that they don't measure up, I don't think it would matter. The students we serve now are not and never again will be that select population which attended college at the turn of the century. In 1910 slightly less than 3% of Americans 25 years old or older had completed four or more years of college; by 1960 the percentage had risen to slightly less than 8%.[6] Last year, double that, 16% of our citizens, had completed four or more years of college.[7] Although economic pressures and lower birth rates may halt this steady increase in the number of college graduates, we most certainly will see larger numbers of older, non-traditional students returning to school in future decades. These figures describe our graduates, those who finish college; freshman enrollments, however, have increased dramatically. Whereas only 12% of all high school graduates entered college in the 1920's, nowadays almost half of them do.[8] According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 47% of the students who graduated from high school in 1978 entered college, and although only about half of that number will complete bachelor's degrees, almost all of them will take freshman composition.[9] For economic as well as philosophical reasons, colleges will not turn students away, will not drastically revise admissions requirements. Instead, the institution will admit qualified students and then allow them to demonstrate success or failure in completing a degree program. In this country, we will always have with us freshmen incapable of so-called college-level writing. Whether or not they should be in college is moot. They are here. Perhaps a better question to ask is, "What should we teach them and how?"

"What should we teach them?" introduces the second complaint some of our colleagues raise about service courses: The subject matter is inferior to the study of literature. "Writing courses have no subject matter," we hear. "The professional journals are worthless, full of what-I-did-last-semester gimmicks; the field produces no intellectually rigorous or original scholarship." The charges seem ironic when compared with George Wincehster Stone's history of the MLA.[10] Almost 100 years ago, in December 1883, when some forty college teachers attended the first MLA meeting in New York, "the teachers of English present were outnumbered about three to one"[11] by modern language faculty; "at least seventeen of those present were under forty, and only a very few were over fifty. It is almost certain that no lady scholars attended."[12] Just as the modern languages, especially English, were once considered inferior to Latin and Greek, so too composition specialists, most of them under forty, now struggle to assert the legitimacy of their field of specialization. In 1920, MLA President John Manly also criticized the organization's journal: "The general impression produced by a survey of our work," he charged, "is that it has been individual, casual, scrappy, scattering."[13] Compare that accusation with the call for a unified scholarly effort Richard Lloyd-Jones issued 57 years later, in 1977, as he addressed the CCCC meeting: "But if we do not try to be in the center of all knowledge, to report the view from the center of how disciplines interact, we deserve our present <u>basic</u> position, that is, our traditional place in the damp cellar of the house of the intellect."[14]

The argument from history offers us some comfort, but it doesn't address the charge that freshman composition courses have no subject matter. In my view, the subject matter is language, specifically the students' effective use of language in a variety of rhetorical contexts. I emphasize <u>students'</u>

and "effective use of language" to counter objections our collegues raise about the course as it is presently taught in some institutions. Freshman composition courses which focus primarily on literature or on grammar are not, in my opinion, writing courses. In the latter course, language as an abstract system of grammatical rules, not the effective use of language, predominates; in the former course, literature, somebody else's use of language, not the student's, becomes the center of attention. Of course, discussions of grammar and literature have a place in freshman composition courses, but their primary function must be to encourage students and their teachers to write, to solve progressively more difficult rhetorical problems. In a good writing course, students are not primarily consumers of a subject matter, assimilating a body of knowlege, the products of research and scholarship; rather, they are producers of language, engaged in the process of composing. Properly taught, the course requires us to spend less time lecturing and more time guiding our students' practice with planning, drafting, and revising their writing. Students and their wars with words, not a subject matter somehow abstracted from that battle, must be the focus of the course.

Some of our colleagues also forget that even though composition has recently re-emerged as a specialization within English, the rhetorical tradition is 2500 years old, more than twice as old as the earliest English literature. Is the tradition intellectually rigorous? The work of Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero, Longinus, Bishop Isidore of Seville, Erasmus, Ramus, Blair, and more recently, Burke, Kinneavy, Young, Becker, Pike, and Hirsch certainly do not lack intellectual rigor. Writing teachers benefit from and contribute to an enormous professional library which contains valuable historical surveys, theoretical discussions, empirical research, and pedagogical scholarship. Is any of it original? "Original" scholarship

is rare in any field. But I think our generation has increased the value of our library since the late 1960's. Our contributions reassert the importance of invention and apply what we have learned from the social sciences, especially linguistics and psychology, to rhetoric. As the bibliographical essays in Teaching Composition attest, many topics remain central to our teaching. Even so, in his preface to that volume, Gary Tate expresses the hope that "other, better books will appear in the future to help convince composition teachers that their field, in the works of Richard Lloyd-Jones, 'does support a body of knowlege and serious scholarship.'"[15]

At the same time, serious scholarship cannot advance unless the profession, institutions, and especially departments support the effort. Although a department may appreciate the work of its composition teachers, most of them untenured junior faculty, its gratitude rarely affects hiring, promotion, and tenure. When departments attach great significance to graduate teaching and research, they perpetuate the view that freshmen are inferior to other students. When literary scholarship matters more than rhetorical research, departments support the notion that teaching composition is inferior to teaching literature. The department may regret its "service function" but then does much to promote it.

Today, a graduate student eager to make her mark in rhetoric and composition would be foolish to take courses exclusively in the areas she needs most--rhetoric, linguistics, education, and perhaps psychology. Without a strong background in literature, few departments would hire her, even though every department now needs more composition teachers and fewer professors of literature. If she gets a job, she must be careful not to teach too many composition courses, for "service" promotions are rare. She may safely publish a few articles in College English, College Composition and Communication, or Research in the Teaching of English, but she must also

support her vita with publications in literature, with evidence of competent teaching and directing graduate students' research. Research proposals are more likely to receive her chairman's endorsement if she investigates Shakespeare, not Blair, but if she teaches three sections of composition each semester, she will be pressed to do any research at all. A few years later, she may leave the profession anyway because a departmental committee judges that she's neither a hotshot rhetorician nor a promising literary critic. Like many bright, dedicated, enthusiastic scholars and teachers, she will have been sacrificed to the gods who placate schizophrenic departments resenting their "service function."

They are false gods, all of them. Freshmen can think, and read, and write, as we have discovered when we stop lecturing about a subject matter and let them practice thinking, reading, and writing. High school teachers, most of them, do prepare our students as best they can given the enormous demands on their time and energy and our regrettable failure to understand or support their work. Research in the field has contributed much to our understanding of how people learn to write and why they don't; it also raises important questions which still need answers, questions we shouldn't have to postpone until we are securely full-professored.

But false gods are not easily denied. So long as a faculty believes that most freshmen don't belong in college, that composition courses have no subject matter, that teaching writing represents a cop-out for those who can't excel in literary research, then the department is also stuck with the illusion that much of its work is demeaning. False gods have convinced many of our colleagues to surrender to society's opinion that their role is inconsequential in a culture which worships money and technology. So they have stopped asserting energetically the supremacy of their calling, losing sight of their objectives, becoming passive remonstrants and chronic bitchers,

and suffering a loss of their own professional prestige. They are unhappy because they have convinced themselves they should be.

We can restore our profession the respect it deserves by making these service courses more than serviceable. Our attitudes, not the world, need changing. Service courses will stop being demeaning when we refuse to consider them demeaning. We must take these courses seriously, see them as more essential than any other learning, because language is the foundation of all learning. Writing, speaking, and reading literature intelligently all depend upon language. If students are to master that language, we must regard it, not as something casual, serviceable, reconstructive, or remedial, but as central to a student's education.

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Notes

[1]C. C. Thatch, "The Essentials of Education," Journal of Proceedings and Addresses (NEA: 1898), pp. 94-95.

[2]"Basic Issues in the Teaching of English," PMLA 74 (September 1959), 6.

[3]On Further Examination: Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline (New York: CEEB, 1977), p. 46ff. Findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress are similarly liable to misinterpretation; cf. John C. Mellon, National Assessment and the Teaching of English (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1975).

[4]Robert C. Pooley, "Achieving Continuity in High-School and College English," College English, 6(December 1944), 152.

[5]Pooley, p. 152.

[6]National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 1977-78 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), Table 11, p. 14.

[7]"Proportion of Americans Who Have Attended College Rose During the 1970's, Census Bureau Reports," Chronicle of Higher Education, 20 October 1980, p. 13.

[8]NCES, Digest, Table 10, p. 14.

[9]NCES, Digest, p. 13.

[10]George Winchester Stone, Jr., "The Beginning, Development, and Impact of the MLA as a Learned Society, 1883-1958," PMLA, 73 (December 1958), 23-44.

[11]Stone, p. 25.

[12]Stone, p. 24.

[13]Quoted in Stone, p. 35.

[14]Richard Lloyd-Jones, " A View from the Center," CCC, 29 (February 1978), 28.

[15]Gary Tate, ed., Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays (Fort Worth, Tx.: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. ix.